

Honoring Holocaust Survivors During the High Holy Days

It's the names that catch my attention first – always the names.

Among the more humbling parts of serving a congregation is reading the list of names for Kaddish. Each day we invoke the memory of someone's parent; someone's child; someone's spouse; someone's sibling; someone's friend. Each day we are reminded that our names too will someday adorn that list. Each day, through our prayers, we hope to elevate the *neshamot* (souls) of loved ones who are at eternal rest.

In coming to the High Holiday season, the list changes a little. In addition to the individual names of those who passed on the 1st of Tishrei (Rosh HaShanah) or the 10th of Tishrei (Yom Kippur), we read family names: The Kremski family; the Rosencwaig family; the Gruca family. Often there is a list of individuals, each with the same last name. The reason for both types of listings, of course, is the Holocaust. When our members do not know on which date their loved ones were killed, they choose to remember them during the Days of Awe. The Kremski family; the Rosencwaig family; the Gruca family ...

And it is at this time of year that, for many years now, we as a congregational family have chosen to honor the Holocaust survivors in our midst. When I first came to Shaarey Zedek a dozen years ago, the custom was to invite the survivors to rise on Kol Nidre. About five years ago we switched from honoring them on Kol Nidre night to honoring them on Yom Kippur day. Many of the survivors were not able to drive at night, and so their ability to participate in the service was limited. Over these last many years, even in switching to daytime, we have fewer and fewer survivors left. In their place, we ask their children, grandchildren, and – with gratitude to God – their great-grandchildren to rise.

What, though, do we do this year? How do we honor the survivors among us when we each are praying from the sanctuary of our own homes? Certainly, the Kaddish names will still be read – the Kremski family; the Rosencwaig family; the Gruca family ... but how do we best honor the survivors?

This Shabbat, we mark Shabbat Shuvah: the Sabbath of Return (i.e., repentance) that falls between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. A special *haftarah* will be recited, but we will read Parashat Ha-azinu: the penultimate portion of the entire of the entire Torah. Moses is addressing our ancestors for the final time before he dies and they cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Much of the portion is a poem – a love song – to God and to the Jewish People. And the first word of that poem is *haazinu*: give ear. Listen.

And that of course is the best answer to how we honor our Holocaust survivors this year, or any year really. Listen. We listen to their stories. We listen to their names. We listen to their

life. We listen to their wisdom. Whether they are still in the world of the living or if they have passed to the peace of life eternal, we listen.

The second greatest honor we can provide those who survived the Holocaust, as well as those murdered in the Holocaust, is to speak. We share their stories aloud. We share their names aloud. We talk about their lives. We repeat their wisdom. And we speak out against hatred, bigotry, discrimination, oppression, persecution, and fear-mongering whenever and wherever we see it. We also speak out against apathy and complacency in the face of evil and wrongdoing.

The third greatest honor we can provide those who survived the Holocaust is to protect Israel's right to exist as a secure and peaceful Jewish state. History has shown that Jews are safest when there is a Jewish army protecting Jewish people in the Jewish land. And finally, the fourth greatest honor we can provide to Holocaust survivors and to those millions of our people who were murdered is to show up. During a pandemic, the best protection for Jews is to stay home while the best protection for Judaism is to continue to participate in synagogue life. Jewish armies protect Jewish bodies, as do the authorities in free and upright societies. But synagogue membership, engaging in Jewish learning, performing acts of loving-kindness and participating in Jewish communal worship, though, are what protect Jewish souls. And virtual prayer is real prayer; virtual community is real community.

I do not yet know whether I will ask the survivors to rise this year while in the privacy of their own homes. I am not yet sure whether that will bring them the honor they deserve. But I do know that I will listen to their stories. I do know that I will speak up for the rights of other minorities such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the rights of women; I will fight too against those who foment fear and perpetuate mistruths. I will do my best to protect Israel's right to exist, freely and securely, as a Jewish state, and I will support Israelis. And I will show up to Shul: to my Shul, Congregation Shaarey Zedek. For *minyanim*, for *Shabbatot*, and for holidays, I will show up.

At this time of year and, frankly, always, I will remember the Kremski family; the Rosencwaig family; the Gruca family ... because they're my family. By the way, I believe that they're your family too. They're our family because we – you and me – were family. May those murdered in the Shoah be remembered for a blessing. May those who survived the Shoah but have passed away: may they be remembered for a blessing. And those, thank God, still among us today: may they know the blessing they are to each and every one of us. May they be honored.

The Kremski family; the Rosencwaig family; the Gruca family ...

Rebecca, Caleb and Ayal join me in wishing you Shabbat shalom and *g'mar chatimah tovah*: may we be sealed in the book of life for life.

Rabbi Aaron Starr
24 September 2020